

Telephone interview with former Coast Guard LCDR Armand Chapeau, wounded in Vietnam, and received medical care aboard USS *Repose* (AH-16). Conducted by Jan K. Herman, Historian of the Navy Medical Department, 5 February 2009.

How did you get to Vietnam as a member of the Coast Guard?

The Coast Guard had twenty-six 82-foot patrol boats over there in Operation Market Time. We also had explosive loading details. Those were in some of the bigger ports like Cam Ranh Bay, Danang, and Saigon. We also had LORAN stations so the aviators would know where they were. The larger cutters--the High Endurance Cutters--went over, some from the East Coast, some from the West Coast. They went over to Vietnam for a year and then came back. They were also involved in Market Time. Market Time was a four-tiered layer of vessels from the DMZ south up around to the Gulf of Thailand with a destroyer escort radar being the outside ship and then a minesweeper next, then the 82-foot Coast Guard cutter next, and then the Navy swift boats. We worked jointly. Anybody trying to make it inbound to the coast of South Vietnam, especially if they came from the north, was stopped and inspected. A number of them were North Vietnamese trawlers filled with weapons and supplies for the VC. They were interdicted and shot up. But that's not how I got shot.

What was the ship you were on?

The Coast Guard cutter *Point Ellis*. She was an 82-foot patrol boat and I was the XO. We were up in Quang Tri Province. The Cua Viet River comes out of Quang Tri. Then north of Cua Viet is the Ben Hai River. The Ben Hai separates North and South Vietnam up there near the DMZ. The Marines had an AMTRAC battalion at Cua Viet. There was also a small Vietnamese junk force navy base there.

The Marines called us on the radio and said they had detected some movement in the tree line. The land topography there was sandy beach, a line of trees, and behind that, sand dunes. If you were at sea looking toward the shore, that's what it looked like. If you were coming south, the easiest way to sneak south was in the trees. Apparently, they had seismic sensors or forward scouts, and detected some movement. They asked us to place some harassment interdiction fire in there.

We went into the area and stuck our bow in the sand on the beach. Where the waves lapped ashore, there was a sharp drop-off so you could have your bow on the beach and have 10 feet of water underneath your stern. So we did that and began putting .50 caliber fire and 81mm mortar in there. We had a .50 caliber and 81mm over and under mount up on the bow. We used the .50 caliber for spotting and then the mortar for blowing things up.

The CO was on the port side looking out the port window. We had roll-down windows. The pilot house on those boats was made of aluminum. I was driving with my butt on the chair with my feet on the deck. The next thing I knew, I was underneath the chart table about 4 feet aft and to the right. I couldn't figure out what had happened. I said, "Damn, I must have fallen." When I went to get back up, my legs wouldn't work. Then my right arm hurt like hell.

The skipper then grabbed the wheel and we backed out. One of the enginemen came up from the engine room with one of the firemen. They hauled me down off the bridge and lay me atop the life raft container on deck. They got the first aid kit out. I was wearing a flak jacket, a

pair of khaki shorts, tennis shoes, and khaki socks. I had bled all down my back. They got my flak jacket off. My tee shirt was red with blood, the back of my pants was red with blood. And I was bleeding out of my arm. They cut my clothes off me and I was just in my tennis shoes and socks. They put a pressure dressing on my back and a pressure dressing on my arm.

We could see the *Repose* steaming south. She had just finished loading up wounded from Quang Tri. We got her on the radio and they sent a Navy swift boat over. The swift boat put a Stokes litter aboard, gave me a shot of morphine, put an "M" and the time on my forehead with Merthiolate.

Who was doing this?

A fireman. Actually, I gave myself the morphine shot because the first time he tried it he was so nervous he broke the needle off.

So you had the little morphine syrettes--the little squeeze tubes.

Yes. They then loaded me in the Stokes litter, put me aboard the swift boat, and off we rode to the *Repose*. When we got there, that was probably the scariest moment of the whole thing. They lowered what I called a fish davit--a crane arm with a wire rope line to hook onto the Stokes litter to lift me up. I had a blanket over me and a blanket under me. I realized that the Navy Stokes litters did not have flotation gear on them. Coast Guard Stokes litters did. As they strapped me in, I got to thinking, if that cable breaks, I'm fish food. So the first thing I did after I got out of reach of the guys on deck was I undid the straps so I could separate myself from that litter if the cable broke.

Well, the net effect of that was to blow the blanket off. So I went aboard the *Repose* with tennis shoes and socks, a pressure dressing on my arm, and another on my chest and nothing else.

What about your back?

Well, I was laying on that. And there weren't but 40 or 50 people hanging over the rail looking.

They got me on a gurney and took me down to X-ray. My back didn't hurt, but my chest hurt like hell. They x-rayed my chest and said that something wasn't right. They very carefully turned me over and x-rayed my back. The next thing I knew they were packing sandbags around me saying, "Don't move!"

One of the nurses asked me if I'd like a chaplain and I said yes. She said they had Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish. I said that sounds good. So all three came down. The Catholic chaplain was a Franciscan monk. He was the senior chaplain. He said that they were ready to take me into surgery but that all three chaplains couldn't go. I said, "How about you going with me, father?" He said okay and he went.

Well, they did the surgery and I woke up on the ward. The first thing I did was rip the sheet off because my chest still hurt like hell. And I couldn't move my legs. They were strapped to boards or something. The nurse came in and I said, "I've gotta get up and go to the bathroom."

She said, "You can't get up. Your legs won't work."

I said, "You're gonna have to find a way to get me standing up."

She went and got Dr. [Robert] Meredith.

Was he the surgeon?

He was. He came in with Dr. Oldershaw, who was the neurosurgeon. They said, "Let him get up." So they untied my legs and I stood up. Two corpsmen helped me down to the sick officers' head and I urinated. Then I returned to bed.

But I still couldn't stand anything on my chest. The bullet had apparently damaged the nerves that controlled the muscles across my chest. And those muscles were tightening and relaxing, tightening and relaxing. And they had done it so much that they created pain, real chest pain, so much that I couldn't even stand having a sheet on my chest or a pajama jacket on. That went away after 3 or 4 days, especially after Dr. Meredith started me on librium. I got better every day after that.

What was the deal with the sand bags? Did they think the bullet was explosive?

No. I heard the nurse say, "We think the bullet is in his spine; we don't want him moved."

So the sand bags had nothing to do with explosive ordnance. They wanted to immobilize you and that was the best way to do it.

Yes. We didn't have all these horse collars back then. I understood later that Meredith and Oldershaw operated on me for more than a couple of hours because they couldn't find the bullet. They had to turn the spinal cord upside down and open the dura to finally find it. Meredith told me that he didn't think I'd ever be able to walk again.

What had happened was that the sensory nerves had really been beat up. The motor nerve worked. And as he ran this little wheel with pins on it up and down my legs and across the bottoms of my feet, he got no reaction at all because I couldn't feel it. But that didn't mean that I couldn't move my legs. The right one was slower than the left but, as far as mobility was concerned, the left one was worse than the right as far as sensation was concerned. It took almost a year for that to go away. When I left the ship and began to walk fast or something like that, I started wearing two pairs of socks on the right foot and one pair on the left so the sensation of the feet hitting the ground would be equal.

I went back to duty after 33 days. The XO of the hospital ship and the CO of the Coast Guard forces in Vietnam had gone to the War College together. The Coast Guard CO came out and gave me my Purple Heart.

When we pulled into Subic, Dr. Meredith said that I could have liberty. So I went ashore with two Marine pilots and we headed for the nearest bar. I had one whiskey sour, fell off the bar stool, and couldn't get up. They carried me back to the ship. Meredith saw this and said, "Uh, oh. I'll have to cut back on your librium."

We spent about 3 or 4 days in Subic and by then I was feeling pretty good. I asked the XO if I could stand watches up on the bridge and make myself useful. He said, sure. So I qualified as an underway OD on the *Repose*.

We got back to Danang and they discharged me fit for duty. Someone had already taken my place on the patrol boat so I went to the division staff there at Danang on the Navy base. When someone else went on R&R, I took their place. I went out and it was monsoon time. And that meant 10- to 12-foot seas in an 82-foot boat. I was getting the hell beat out of me. I went on

R&R to Hawaii and came back. The *Repose* was in so went out to see Meredith. He started running the pins and needles thing up and down my legs and checking reflexes. He then told me that I had some more healing to do. "You need to go stateside."

He wrote up that narrative you saw. He had in mind the Naval Hospital at San Diego or Oak Knoll, where they had a number of neurosurgeons on the staff. But I ended up with the Public Health Service in San Francisco where they had no neurosurgeons. They put me on a ward and sent a neurologist to see me. After raising a little hell, I finally got to see a neurosurgeon. He gave me a year of sick leave and told me to be reevaluated every 120 days until I was fit for duty.

I came home to Athens, GA, in November of 1967 to the house I'm in now. I was told to lay flat on my back 18 hours a day and not to climb two flights of stairs without stopping at the landing and resting for a few moments. In other words, I was to do nothing to aggravate my spine. And not to lift anything over 5 pounds.

I had a daughter who was born in May and weighed a helluva lot more than 25 pounds. I couldn't pick her up. She had to be handed to me. My pa-in-law looked at me laying on the couch when he went to work and laying on the couch when he got home. Tempers got short so I got in the car, drove to Savannah, and went to work. Coast Guard headquarters found out about it and told me I was supposed to be on sick leave. I said, "I'm tired of it." So they told me to get a physical to see if I was fit for light duty.

I was limited to the BOQ at Hunter Army Air Field during the week in a suite. My suite-mate was a PHS doctor. He gave me a physical at happy hour and said I was fit for light duty. They then transferred me to Miami and it was late June when I had a physical and was fit for full duty. I went on after that.

I keep in touch with Bob Meredith. Whenever I go to the West Coast, I do my best to get to San Diego and visit with him and his wife. He's got the slides of my surgery. He calls me his old miracle.

Have you had any ill effects since you've healed?

Yes. If I talk to Bob I'm gonna tell him about it. Five of the 19 sutures have come untied.

You mean you still have sutures in there?

He put in 19 sutures and 4 stainless steel clips. The clips were holding the dura together and the sutures were to keep the back muscles away from where he did the laminectomy to get at the bullet.

Did Dr. Meredith give you the bullet for a souvenir?

Yes. It didn't have anything on it, either. It was as smooth as a baby's butt.

Was it a jacketed round?

The jacket went into my right arm.

The bullet must have hit the aluminum and the jacket separated from the bullet.

It hit the aluminum, separated, went between the panels of my flak jacket, glanced off my shoulder blade, traversed my back and went between the disc and into the dura of my spinal cord without any bone damage.

So you never really suffered from a chest wound.

It was a back wound but the pain was in my chest.

So they gave the bullet to you.

A .30 caliber armor-piercing round.

That's amazing.

What was amazing was Meredith's and Oldershaw's skill and the nurses. I remember that Catholic chaplain coming to see me after the surgery and saying, "You're not Catholic."

And I said, "No. I'm an Episcopalian."

He said, "We've been talking about you at lunch. Let me tell you something. The Protestant chaplain is a little miffed."

I said, "He's probably a southern Baptist."

He said, "You're right but why did you ask for me?"

I said, "The Catholic Church and the Episcopal Church are next door neighbors, for all practical purposes. And I was high church Episcopalian. If I had to go, I figure with Last Rights and all, you would give me the best sendoff."

"So why did you ask for the three of us?"

"Well, the way the nurses were talking, I was in serious trouble. So I figured that with Latin, English, and Yiddish, someone would probably get the message across."

I think it's incredible that the hospital ship was just a stone's throw away when you were shot.

It was either dumb luck or God's blessing.